

The Amazing Travels of George and Cecilia McGhee

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

Everywhere they went, this diplomatic couple collected art, artifacts, fossils and minerals that now reside in OU museums and libraries.

Turquoise-glazed Syrian pottery from the 1200s, a three-tiered Chinese picnic box from the 1700s, Byzantine crosses dating from 400 A.D. and 15th century Islamic tile art are a tiny sampling from a trove of treasures that for many years resided in rural Virginia. While these objects originated worlds away from Oklahoma, in some ways they have found their way home.

Art, objects d'art, photos, books, rocks, fossils, minerals, seashells and personal papers belonging to the late Ambassador George and Cecilia McGhee, arrived by the box and crate full on campus in February from their long-time home in Middleburg, Virginia.

Last November, a group from the University of Oklahoma, led by President David L. Boren, paid a visit to Farmers Delight Plantation, the McGhees' home, where the collection was housed under the ownership of the McGhee Foundation.

"The McGhee Foundation [established by George McGhee in 2005] had changed its mission and was downsizing at the time OU was contacted," says John Lovett, director and curator of the University's Western History Collections. "Farmers Delight Plantation, the last residence of Ambassador McGhee and his wife, had been sold. There



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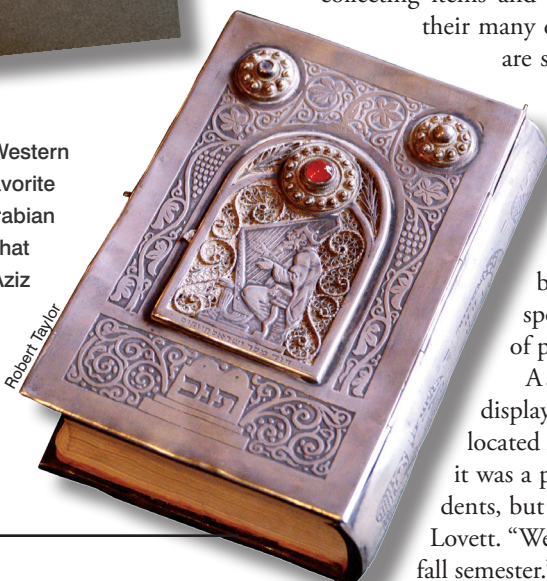
Ambassador George C. McGhee and Mrs. Cecilia McGhee in Ankara, Turkey, 1952.



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John Lovett, director and curator of OU's Western History Collections, shows off one of his favorite pieces from the McGhee Collection—an Arabian sword, complete with jeweled scabbard—that was presented to McGhee by King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia in 1950.

The McGhee Collection featured several rare books, including this Hebrew Bible with an ornate silver binding that depicts the 12 tribes of Israel and King David playing a harp.

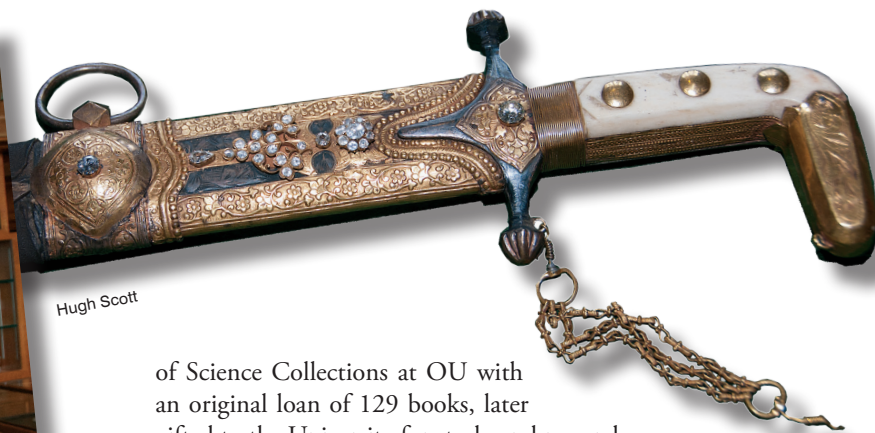


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were several outer buildings that included research facilities, a library and a museum. We were invited to meet with the foundation and view these incredible artifacts. [The collection] was so large. We did not really know when we arrived exactly what was available.”

Texas native George McGhee, a 1933 OU graduate, was a Rhodes Scholar, a geologist and oilman, who later became a pivotal figure in postwar American diplomacy. During his career in the U.S. State Department, he helped create and shape military, economic and petroleum ties between the U.S. and countries in Europe and the Far East. While serving during four presidential administrations—those of Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson—McGhee was appointed ambassador to Turkey and ambassador to then-West Germany. He also was 1st Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs and 3rd Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.

His wife, Cecilia, was the daughter of OU graduate, geologist and oilman Everette Lee DeGolyer, who founded the History



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of Science Collections at OU with an original loan of 129 books, later gifted to the University for study and research.

“Ambassador and Cecilia McGhee lived so many different places, at interesting and unique times in history,” says Jackie Reese, assistant professor and librarian for the Western History Collections, where the bulk of the acquisition is being catalogued. “They were amazing collectors.”

The McGhees traveled to nearly every corner of the globe, collecting items and documenting their visits at each of their many destinations. Along with the artifacts are scrapbooks and photos of the family, which included six children. They were known in diplomatic circles as boisterous, adventurous and fun-loving. Cecilia McGhee was a lifelong diarist and among the artifacts are many sketch and notebooks filled with her personal correspondence, observations and drawings of people she met.

A sample of the collection is currently on display in the Western History Collections located in Monnet Hall. “Initially, this exhibit was a preview for OU faculty, staff and students, but now we are going to expand it,” says Lovett. “We will keep this display up through the fall semester.”

Among the items on display are decorative objects such as Mediterranean Tanagra figurines that exemplify the Greek ideals of femininity, the three-tiered Chinese picnic box, Syrian pottery, Mexican folk art pieces and one of Cecilia McGhee’s notebooks. It features a pencil sketch of Athenagoras I, patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul, Turkey, alongside a photograph of Cecilia seated next to him. Her notes on this particular visit are included as well.

The variety of the vast holdings from the McGhee Foundation makes it a one-of-a-kind collection, adds Lovett. He credits the connection with OU President Boren for its new home, or homes, on campus.

Boren’s long relationship with the family dates back to his time in the nation’s capital. “Shortly after I became president of OU, Ambassador McGhee, whom I had known when I served in the U.S. Senate, invited me to dinner at his home in Middleburg, Virginia. He was very loyal to OU and to Oklahoma. At that time, he offered to give the University his



Sam Noble Museum registrar Elsbeth Dowd examines an antelope headdress that was made by the Bambara people in Mali, Africa. Despite its heavy weight, it was worn during tribal dances.

exceptional collection of Greek, Russian and Byzantine icons. Our community is especially grateful that he chose to leave several special items in his will to the University. The McGhees had long ties to OU.”

With the acquisition of the multi-faceted McGhee Collection, OU has enhanced its permanent collections in the fine arts, natural history and the history of science across campus. The Youngblood Energy Library, the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, along with the Western History Collections, all are beneficiaries.

In addition to art and decorative objects, McGhee also collected rocks and minerals from around the world, and Cecilia collected sea shells. Many of these specimens are in the Youngblood Energy Library at the Mewbourne College of Earth and Energy. Jody Foote, who holds the Youngblood Chair at the library, says her staff is in the process of creating a display space for this collection.

“Mr. McGhee’s passion for rocks and minerals began as a child in Waco, Texas,” she says. “His interest continued while he studied geology at the University of Oklahoma. Mr. McGhee’s long career with the U.S. State Department gave him the opportunity to travel and collect rocks and minerals from around the world. Among the rocks and minerals given to OU are specimens from

Mexico, South Africa and Brazil. And we were pleased to find a Barite rose rock, the Oklahoma state rock, in the collection.”

A few of the McGhee rock and mineral specimens went to the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History, where registrar Elsbeth Dowd says the museum adhered to its policies regarding collection development when assessing what to add to its extensive holdings. Natural history artifacts selected must come with information on their provenance and legal acquisition, as well as hold research value.

“Many places around the world, particularly in the Middle East, have had their history exported illegally,” she explains. “We had to ensure that the pieces we chose came with clear documentation of their ownership. We were able to acquire some really nice pieces to enhance our collection.”

Those pieces include African masks, hats and sculptures, textiles from Peru, neo-Babylonian ornamental seals and several fossils. One of Dowd’s favorites is a 200-pound fossil of a Crinoid, more commonly known as a sea lily because it looks more like a flower than a marine animal.

“It is a large, invertebrate fossil and is quite remarkable,” she says. “The items we obtained have benefit to the University and to students due to their research value. This collection is a tribute to the McGhees, who had such an interest in the world around them.”

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art was gifted a number of orthodox icons from the McGhee Collection in 1998, says Mark White, senior curator and curator of collections for the museum. Therefore, the art museum accepted very little from this most recent donation. “We received an additional icon to complement what we have already received, a few Mexican masks and masterworks on paper,” he says.

The cataloguing and photographing of the collection will continue well into fall with the exhibited items in the Western History Collections remaining on display during that time. Dowd says she is pleased that many of the items currently can be viewed by the public.

“Each of us who were fortunate enough to travel to Farmer’s Delight Plantation has a mission and collection policy,” she says. “John Lovett at Western History Collections has a wide scope in this regard, and I am pleased that he has the capacity to accept so much of this collection and exhibit it as well.”

Lovett adds that the University is fortunate to be the recipients of such a range of items.

“This is a unique collection that provides material that will help University libraries support several areas of research, including geology, anthropology, political science, history and the fine arts.”



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